

The following is my [Op Ed](#) from today's San Jose Mercury News

As a teen, I once told my mother to speak only English to me. On the surface, things Japanese just were not "cool" enough for this California high school kid. Even more haunting was the stigma of World War II and the struggles my family suffered through during those years in an internment camp on account of our ancestry. Years later, as a Peace Corps volunteer, I realized what I lost by shunning my Japanese. Learning Spanish in El Salvador opened my mind to a new world view. I also realized that in losing Japanese, I lost a window to a culture that has made a major impact on the world. That is why I find the fear of multilingualism irrational. Some view it as though it were a disease infecting our country instead of a cure; in fact, many folks pay thousands of dollars to acquire a second language. Many foreign policy blunders the United States has committed in the past, and the not-so-recent past, could have been avoided had we not looked at the world through a mono-cultural lens. Rather than English dying, the real tragedy facing our country is the children of immigrants who lose their ancestral language. I believe that immigrants should learn English when they come to the United States - but not lose the language skills they bring with them. That is why I always support legislation that nurtures multilingualism. Multilingualism not only culturally enriches our country, but it makes long-term strategic sense if we want to remain the leader of the free world in a global era. I recently introduced the "One America, Many Voices" Act (H.R. 3727) that would give commensurate pay to federal employees whose official job descriptions require another language. Currently, most government agencies don't compensate for these required bilingual skills. The private sector rewards foreign-language skills because they contribute to their bottom line. Why should hardworking, skilled public servants deserve any less? I am also concerned that many federal agencies are still not complying with a 7-year-old executive order, which directs federal agencies to provide proper access to speakers of other languages. For example, during Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, agencies such as FEMA did not provide vital information in languages immigrant communities could understand, resulting in unnecessary harm and suffering. I am urging that there be a General Accountability Office study to understand why agencies are not following this executive order and to better understand the consequences of failing to do so. We've all heard the sentiment, "Let them learn English if they want anything from us." I believe effective integration is a two-way street. The faster we embrace new communities, the faster they become Americans. The more they are alienated, the longer it takes. Most immigrant communities in this country were not proficient in English when they landed. It took the Germans, the Italians, the Dutch and others more than a generation to absorb the language as a community. Italian and Yiddish were widely spoken in New York until the 1960s; some towns in New Jersey still kept official minutes in German into the 20th century. There was a reason - people can't become a part of the system if they do not understand it. Yes, every immigrant needs to learn English, but they should not shed their language in the process. Contrary to what anti-immigrants argue, I know Vietnamese, Filipino, Indian, Latino and Chinese children in my district who have actually lost their family's native tongue. When they grow up, they would be better equipped to carry out business relationships south of the border or in the Pacific Rim, had they kept their native languages. This would be even more important if they went on to help shape global U.S. policy. In addition to the economic and

## Immigrants' language skills crucial in era of global economy

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strategic advantages we'll gain as a multilingual country, research shows that fluent speakers of more than one language have higher cognitive skills than monolingual students. A 2006 study in the San Diego Unified School District found that fluent bilingual students have a higher grade-point average than English monolingual students. So why shun multilingualism? Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington's followers would argue that it dilutes American culture. Tell that to the great American composer Aaron Copland. What about "klutz" and "spiel" from Yiddish, or "bunny" and "slogan" from Scottish-Gaelic? And who has not said "honcho" from Japanese, or "kowitz" from Chinese? America is a glorious mix of cultures, so how can cultures that have been part of ours for so long dilute us? For a country that took world leadership upon its shoulders, it is vital to have a population that can understand the world. Understanding starts with language. Let's not regret losing this asset when it is too late.